

HISTORY OF EZEKIEL JOHNSON AND JULIA HILLS

Ezekiel Johnson, my great grandfather, was born in 1773 (day of month not known) at Uxbridge, Massachusetts. He has been described as being (full middle stature) about 5 ft. 10' tall, and of solid build. He had fine light hair; mild but piercing eyes. He was loved by all who knew him. Ezekiel left the home of his mother, Bethiah Garnsey, and his stepfather, Mr. King, when he was 14 years old. It is said that he preferred to be on his own than to have to endure the presence of his stepfather, whom he disliked. Very little is known of Ezekiel's life before he met and married Julia Hills.

Julia Hills was born 26 September 1783 at Upton, Massachusetts in the County of Worcester. She was the daughter of Joseph and Esther (Ellis) Hills. Very little is known of Julia's early life. There are records, however, that lead us to believe that she came from a religious family; that she and her brothers and sisters were given the opportunity of an education. One of her father's prize possessions was his small, well-used dictionary, which infers that he was an educated man. Their family seemed to be very close. A letter written to their mother by Joel Hills, Julia's brother, tells of the love and devotion that they felt for their mother.

Newport, Kentucky

February 14, 1815

Dear and affectionate Mother,
Do not suppose that I have forgotten you in consequence of my having remained so long silent, for although I have been rather undutiful through a multiplicity of business, yet give me leave to assure you that your welfare and happiness will ever occupy the first place in my heart.

I arrived with my family in good health at Cincinnati, Ohio, on the opposite side of the Ohio River on the 7th day of January, 1815, and in a few months after, moved to this place where I have established a brick yard and have found my expectation answered in regards to the country. My prospects are still brightening and I have only to regret not coming to this country a few years sooner, as in that case a small sum of money well laid out according to the course of events which have since transpired, would have placed me at this time in a state of independence. The only regret that I feel in my present situation is the being so far removed from so many friends, and particularly from you, my dear mother, as it would afford the greatest happiness to contribute to yours, and in some measure to discharge the natural and affectionate debt due to the care of the dearest and best of mothers, by dispensing her cares and fulfilling her wishes in the evening of her days when nature appears to

claim a return of that care and tenderness, which is generally lavished on us in our infancy.

Give my best respects to my sister and the rest of our kindred at Grafton, and be sure you write me soon after receiving this, and make me acquainted with your health and circumstances. My family is all in good health and joins with me in their concern and good wishes for your happiness.

With a heart glowing with the warmest gratitude for the parental care and affection, which you have ever evidenced toward me, and an earnest prayer to Almighty God that a triple portion of his choicest mercies may attend you, I subscribe myself, your ever-dutiful son,

Joel Hills

Julia's family belonged to the Presbyterian Church. They held a strong belief that what we do in this life will affect us in the hereafter. This belief had a great influence on their actions and thoughts throughout their lives.

Joseph Hills, Julia's father, died while she was still at a young age. Her mother Esther (Ellis) Hills later married Enoch Forbush. They had several children by this marriage.

Julia grew to womanhood in one of the most imaginative and creative periods in our nation's history. It was just after the Revolutionary War had been fought, and when our present government was being formed. Julia was six years old when George Washington took the oath of office to become the nation's first president. With the forming of the government, and the signing of the constitution came not only national advancement but also cultural and religious advancement. For the first time people could worship as they pleased. Public schools were becoming more plentiful, and education was encouraged to a greater extent. At this time, however, only one in every one thousand were able to attend a university.

At the age of 17 Julia married Ezekiel Johnson, January 12, 1801 in Grafton, Massachusetts. Their first child, Joel Hills, was born in Grafton, Massachusetts, 23 March 1802. Their second child Nancy Mariah was born in Northboro, Massachusetts on 1 August 1803, and their third child Seth Garnsey was born 14 February 1805 in Royalston, Massachusetts. After the birth of Seth Garnsey the family moved to Westford, Vermont. It was there that Delcina Diadamia was born 19 November 1806. They remained in Westford for about seven years. Three more children were born there: Julia Ann was born 9 November 1808; David was born 10 September 1810, and Almera Woodward, on 12 October 1812.

The records of the births of Julia and Ezekiel's children show that the family was always on the move. Ezekiel was born with a restless spirit, which kept him looking for the perfect location. His love for new places was not held down by his growing family. Ezekiel would take his family with him when he could but he would usually go ahead to find a good piece of land. He would clear the land, plant a garden, and if possible build a rough cabin. As soon as the homestead was ready he would return for his family.

June, 1813 they moved to Pomfret, New York. Pomfret was a beautiful place, warmer than Vermont. They had a variety of fruit trees and were able to raise good crops. Julia seemed to like Pomfret better than any place she and Ezekiel had lived thus far.

It is probable that Ezekiel took little or no interest in religious matters, but their older sons and daughters attended the Presbyterian Church with their mother, where they learned to read the Bible. Every letter written by Julia expresses a keen religious temperament. Her letters to her mother show an abiding faith in God and always contain a prayer, which seeks the blessing of the Lord upon her family and friends. While Ezekiel and their son were away from home, the following letter was addressed to her mother and stepfather:

Pomfret, Chautauqua Co., N. Y.

February 27, 1815

My dear Parents:

After my love to you, I will inform you that through the blessings of God, we are all in good health and hope this will find you so. I have not heard a word from you for more than a year. I have written to you four letters since I have received any. Mr. Johnson has gone to Cincinnati, Ohio. He started on the last day of January. I have not heard a word from Joel for a year or more. I am very anxious to hear from my friends. I wrote the particulars of our journey thus far in my last letter. If Mr. Johnson likes that country we calculate to move on in the Spring, if we live and are well. Many families are passing here every day for that place. We like this country first rate upon many accounts. It is not as cold as Vermont and is excellent for grain, grass, and all kinds of produce. With good inhabitant and good schools, my children go to school and learn very fast. Seth and Nancy want to write to their grandmother, but it will cost too much to pay for their letters. I had a daughter born on the 16th of December who is smart and well. I want you to write how you enjoy religion. Whether you are cold and stupid like myself or are you engaged in the good cause of Christ. I hope you are like Mary and have chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away. I hope we shall live, as we shall be prepared to meet in Heaven to swell with the righteous forever. I hope we shall see each other again in a few years, but life is uncertain. I want you to give my love to Aunt Woodward's family, tell the girls to write to me. I remain your affectionate child,

Julia Johnson

After receiving the sad news of the death of her mother she mentions her bereavement in a letter, which she addressed to her half-sister, Delcina Forbush. This letter was carried to Grafton by Ezekiel who returned to the old state on a visit in November 1818.

Pomfret Chautauqua Co., N. Y.

November 11, 1818

Dear Sister,

I have another chance of writing to you, which I improve. I have written several times but received no answer. I have heard of the death of our mother, which was very heavy news to me. We have lost a very kind, affectionate parent of which no doubt you are sensible, but we have and should prepare to follow our dear deceased mother. I wish you would write the particulars concerning her death and write me a long letter. I have been anxious to hear from you for a long time. Almera Woodward (Julia's cousin) wrote to me that you was keeping house for your father and made out very well, which I was glad to hear. I send this letter by Mr. Johnson; he will tell you the particulars of our affairs. I want your father to send me that Great Dictionary that was my father's and if Joel (Hills) has a chance to get it from here he shall have it, for that was my mother's desire as she expressed it when she was up to Vermont. And I wish you would send me some straw braid for a bonnet and Mr. Johnson will pay you for it/ such things are very scarce here. Remember my love to your father and family and take a good share yourself,

Julia Johnson

To Delcina Forbush
My Half Sister

Julia and Ezekiel were blessed with nine more children while they lived in Pomfret.

Susan Ellen born 16 December 1814
Joseph Ellis born 28 April 1817
Benjamin Franklin born 28 July 1818
Mary Ellen born 7 February 1820
Elmer Wood born 26 May 1822
George Washington born 19 February 1823
William Derby born 27 October 1824
Esther Melita born 12 January 1827
Amos Partridge born 15 January 1829

Ezekiel worked as a miller and a carpenter while they were there. It was not easy for them to raise such a large family. Each of their fifteen children had to help in every way possible to clear the land, raise food, and make clothing. As children, their family seemed to be strong and healthy. They only lost one child, Elmer Wood, who died at the age of three months on the 14th of September 1822. Their second misfortune was when Nancy accidentally fell from a horse and broke her hip socket. At that time in medicine, nothing could be done for her. Nancy was left crippled. She could walk only with the aid of her crutches.

Julia's brother, Joel Hills, visited them on his way from Canada to his home in Kentucky. Julia and Ezekiel decided to let their oldest son Joel join him on his journey home to Kentucky. After Joel had been away from home for two years, Ezekiel got restless again and started west. He wanted to see what Ohio had to offer. He was not impressed with Ohio, so he crossed over to Kentucky to pick up his son Joel, who was thirteen years old at that time. Together they walked 500 miles to

return to Pomfret, New York. They had to make their way through thick wooded areas and past places where Indians had killed entire families.

In their long journey Ezekiel was not able to find a place that he had a desire to move to, so the family remained in Pomfret. November 2, 1826, their son Joel Hills married Anna Pixly. Three years later in 1829 Delcina married Lyman Sherman.

Their son, Joel, and his wife made their home in Amhurst (Loren), Ohio. They were still living there in 1831 when the Latter-day Saint missionaries were beginning to circulate throughout the states. At first Joel was not interested but he and his wife continued going to the meetings that the missionaries were holding. After they had attended several meetings, he began to understand more fully the principles of this new Gospel. He, like his brothers and sisters, had a great love for the Bible and so what the missionaries said made a lot of sense to him. Joel's brother, David, was living with Joel at the time and they were both baptized members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints on June 7, 1831, by Elder Sylvester Smith. Joel wanted to share all he had with his family so he wrote a letter to his brother, Seth, and with it he sent a copy of the Book of Mormon.

The news of Joel's conversion was looked upon by his family with horror and disgrace. Benjamin describing this event in his book, My Life's Review, said, "My mother, brother Seth, sister Nancy, and Lyman R. Sherman, with some neighbors, who were all devoted to religion, met together secretly to read the Book of Mormon, or perhaps to deplore the delusion into which Joel had fallen. But their reading soon led to marveling at the simplicity and purity of what they read. After a few days of secrecy I was permitted to meet with them, to hear the Book of Mormon read. I was only thirteen at the time but sensed the importance of the book."

In January 1832, my brothers came to see us and bear their testimony. My mother and Lyman R. Sherman, my brother-in-law, were soon baptized by Elder Joseph Brackenbury, shortly followed by the baptism of all my brothers and sisters who had attained their maturity. At this time my father was not inclined to accept the Gospel and would not permit we minor children to receive our baptism. No sooner had my family and neighbors been baptized and the news spread around, the priests had started to howl about Faith, Prophet, and delusion. They tried everything possible to turn us away from the truth, calling for "signs", etc., asking why my sister Nancy, was not healed.

Young Benjamin went back to Ohio with Joel. The following summer when Ezekiel was not so bitter about the church he went to Ohio to see the Prophet and decided to sell his home and move to Chicago, Illinois, which was then a small town. But all hope that he would join the church soon vanished. What little light there had been soon disappeared, and so great was his darkness that he seemed possessed of the devil.

In June 1833, Julia went to Kirtland with her children. They traded two of their teams for a home on what they called Kirtland Flat. The home was close to the schoolhouse where Susan and Seth taught. Julia was so dedicated to the church that she would not leave Kirkland to go with Ezekiel to Chicago. When Ezekiel found that

his family would not go with him to Chicago he decided to stay with them in Kirtland. However, there was so much strife over his refusal to join the church that he soon left. Julia then had the added responsibility of supporting her large family alone.

With the children's help Julia manufactured stocks, which were men's ruffled neckwear. They also made palm leaf hats, which were then coming into use. The family supplied both the stocks and hats to the merchants. This helped them obtain a comfortable living.

It was at this time that the members of the church were told that they must prepare to build a temple. This was to be the first temple in this dispensation. The entire family gave everything they had. All of Julia's sons worked diligently. David, who was 23 years old, tried to work too hard. His lungs started to bleed and he became seriously ill. On October 30, 1833, he was the first of five of the family to die of consumption, which is now called tuberculosis. Before David died, he was able to bear his testimony through the gift of tongues. This was interpreted by his best friend Don Carlos Smith (brother of the Prophet Joseph Smith). The prophet tells us in Church History of the loss David's death was to the Church.

One of the first miracles in the church came shortly after when Joseph Smith Sr. and Jared Carter came to Julia's home to give them a blessing. When Brother Carter saw Nancy on her crutches he commanded her in the name of Jesus Christ to leave her crutches and walk, which she at once did.

At this time the saints that had gone to Missouri were being persecuted to the extent that the Prophet felt he should take a large group of the most faithful to Missouri to help relieve the trouble and tension that existed. Julia's son Seth, her son-in-law Lyman R. Sherman, and her future son-in-law, Almon W. Babbitt, were among those called upon to help at Zions Camp. It was such a strenuous and difficult trip that Seth became ill. The following February they returned home. Seth was so weak that when he tried to work he again became seriously ill. February 19, 1835 he too contracted consumption and died.

The 1st of March Susan, age twenty-two, was taken suddenly ill, vomiting blood. All possible was done for her, that the loving sympathy of kindred, friends and physicians could suggest, but without avail. She lingered but a few days and on the 16th day of March 1836 she died. She died as she had lived, faithful to her religion. Just before death she called her family to her bed and bore to them her testimony of the truth of the Gospel, told them to be faithful to its trusts, and bid them farewell, and fell asleep. Such bereavements came with crushing weight. So much sickness and death tended not only to keep the family limited in means, but no doubt the more prompted them in humility to seek the Lord.

That fall measles and whooping cough swept the town and death knocked once more. Julia's baby Amos became ill. Ezekiel, who was living a few miles away, brought three doctors to the house. However, nothing could be done. Julia felt she could not lose him also, so she called upon the elders and through the power of healing he was saved. But death was not to be deluded, for on 30 October 1836

consumption won once more. This time it was their beloved Nancy who had been not only their sister but had also been their teacher and second mother. Nancy had been a wonderful influence on all their lives.

With Nancy's death Julia had lost all of her older children that were living at home. Without their help she could not keep up her production of stocks and palm leaf hats. However, with the money she had saved she was able to buy a farm just outside of Kirtland.

No sooner had the temple been completed than the saints became unwelcome in Kirtland. The mob violence became so hard for the saints to bear that many left the church. The faithful saints who remained true to the church, continued their labors with an ax or shovel in one hand and a gun in the other. Julia turned the ground floor of her house over to the saints to be used as a gunsmith shop. The temple was at last dedicated and never has there been more wonderful manifestations than were given at that time. And the family rejoiced with the rest of the saints.

But, the pressure on the saints became more extreme, and all that could be done was to leave for Missouri. Within a short time the only saints that were living in Kirtland were the blind, sick, lame, and destitute families. The Prophet asked the presidency of the Seventies, Joel being one of them, to take over the task of supervising the remaining saints on their journey from Kirtland to Missouri. This was called the "Kirtland Camp". There were 520 saints to be cared for in the Kirtland Camp. The Johnson family were members of this group.

The seventies had the saints ship what household goods they could by water. Sixty teams and wagons were found to carry the needed supplies. Money was very scarce; each member put what he or she had into a community fund. When they arrived in Dayton, Ohio it was decided that they would stay there for a month to try to raise what money they could.

There had been much sickness and death along the way. Delcina's husband, Lyman Sherman, died leaving six small children. Delcina decided that it would be best for her to leave the camp and care for her children. She made her home in Quincy, Ohio. The Kirtland Camp moved on. When they were just outside Springfield, Samuel Hale and his wife died. Julie adopted their ten-year-old daughter, Mary Ann, to raise with her own children.

By the time they reached Springfield there was so much illness that it was decided that Julia, Joel and their families should drop out of the camp to care for the sick.

Those that were well were to go on. Julia and her family stayed in Springfield for two years before she was able to join the saints in Nauvoo. While there she wrote this letter to her sister.

Springfield, Illinois

March 15, 1839

Dear Sister,

Having an opportunity of sending a few lines to you or father to send them where we last heard of you to improve it. It is now six years since we heard from you in

any way, we have written several times, but have been moving about so much that we could not have received one even though you had written. You must know we have been very anxious to hear from you as the last news we heard was that you had lost your husband. O! My dear sister, how shall I use words to express my feeling when I look back to the time when we saw each other, the vast change in our situation and circumstances in life, the change of seasons, places and nations, the commotion of the earth and the disposition of men, deceiving and being deceived—The signs of the last day, the fulfillment of Scriptures, etc.—I will say we are all well, who are with us, as usual. And though strange it may appear, I am happy to inform you that we have had the misfortune (if it may be called one) to belong to that poor deluded (as the world says) despised sect of beings called Mormons or Latter-Day Saints, who are verily persecuted for righteousness sake. We left the state of New York about six years ago and went to Kirtland, Ohio where the Lord saw fit to afflict us by taking from us four of the elderly members of my family, Nancy, Seth, David, and Susan; they were all taken from us within four years. How shall—how can—I express my feelings—"But the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away and blessed be the name of the Lord."

We have suffered a great deal of sickness. I was very extremely sick last fall in this place with the fevers almost unto death, but the Lord saw fit to spare my life and measurably restore me to health. Joel is about one hundred miles west of here with his family. Julia and Almera are married; they both did very well, married respected men. Delcina has lost her husband; he died last winter 27th of January. She is in Missouri, and we expect her here soon. I have three sons unmarried men grown up: Joseph, Benjamin, and George. Two of them are with me, the other with Delcina. I have two daughters with me, Mary and Esther. Write immediately on the reception of this. Direct your letter to this place. Give all our respects to our friends of your acquaintance. I remain in affection, your sister, (signed) Julia Johnson

This letter is different from Julia's previous letters in that it lacks the joyousness of the others. Her testimony is stronger and her greatest desire seems to be to present the Gospel message to her kindred. She has suffered afflictions, endured persecution and sorrow, but she is still valiant to the cause and there is no suggestion that she regrets having cast her lot with the persecuted saints.

Julia and her family travelled another one hundred miles to reach Nauvoo. Julia felt that it would be nice if she and her children could settle some land together, and have their own little town just outside Nauvoo. They called their town Ramas, which was later named Macedonia. While they lived in Ramas, death struck her family again. This time Julia's faith was not strong enough to save her youngest child Amos Partridge, who was only 13 years old. He died May 9, 1842.

The next year's cupid played a big part in the family. Mary married George Wilson, Esther married David Tully Le Baron, Joseph married Harriet Snyder, Benjamin married Melissa Bloomfield Le Baron, and George married Maria Jane Johnson.

On June 11, 1845 death took Mary Ellen. It was up to Julia to care for Mary's son, David, and her newborn baby. The baby died six months later. The boy David

Wilson stayed with Julia until her death. Julia's adopted daughter Mary Ann Hale married Julia's son Benjamin as a plural wife.

The Johnson family had been very close with the prophet Joseph Smith from the time they arrived in Kirtland. Any one of them would do anything to help the prophet if they could. When the prophet's wife Emma was instructed to select songs for the church hymnbook, she chose one of Julia's.

*The Joy and the Song
by Julia Hills Johnson*

*We praise Thee, O God, for the joy and the song
Which unto us this beautiful season belong;
We love and adore Thee, for light and for love,
And for all the rich blessings that come from above.*

*The gates are wide open, and they beckon us all
Each to follow and serve at the sound of Thy call;
Thro' portals of praise and thro Zion's fair gates,
We will pass on with songs to the work that awaits.*

*At last in that city, with it's glories untold,
With its gates all of pearl and its streets of pure gold.
We'll give to the Savior, who dwelleth in light,
All the power and dominion and wisdom and light.*

Chorus:

*Hallelujah! Hallelujah! O the joy and the song!
With happy hearts and merry voices we the glad strains prolong.*

Not only Julia but many of her children had a talent for writing.

When the prophet received the revelation on Celestial marriages, it was to Julia he talked with. It was a very difficult law, and so many people could not understand it. But Julia could and she gave her consent for her daughter Almera to be one of his first plural wives. They were married by William Clayton. They also had Julia's daughters, Nancy and Susan sealed to the Prophet, as wives.

As the prophet was now a member of the Johnson family through marriage, envious people nicknamed them "The Royal Family". In Benjamin's book, Life Review, it mentions the incident as follows: "In Macedonia the family were quite numerous and influential and envious people sometimes dubbed as the "Royal Family". When the Prophet Joseph Smith heard of the honor conferred upon us by our neighbors,

he said, "The name is and should be a reality; that they were a royal family", and he, knowing the intemperance of my father, said that he should yet be a great man and sit at the head of a kingdom, and on one occasion he blessed my mother and made her this promise: for your faithfulness and acceptance of so unpopular a doctrine, and bringing such a numerous family into the church, that when the crown should be made for her brow in the Eternal World, everyone of her jewels (children) would be there."

Because the two families had been so close, the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith was a real shock to the family. It also greatly affected Ezekiel who had been inactive in the Gospel. Ezekiel was full of remorse, and from that time on he stopped drinking and started fighting the mobs. In one of the fights he was brutally wounded and was never well again. He died 13 January 1843 in Nauvoo, Illinois.

Although Ezekiel did not always share his family's views on the kind of life they followed, he always had love and devotion for his family. His temple work was done in 1879, and their sixteen children were all sealed to them in 1926. We have no personal history of Julia after the saints were driven out of Nauvoo. We do know her daughter Almeria and sons William and Joseph cared for her and that she died on her way to Utah at Council Bluffs, Iowa, 30 May, 1856. Her children were some of the first colonizers in Utah. They all had large families.

There are many discrepancies in dates, names and spelling. The information shown in this history was obtained from the following sources:

From: Johnson 'Informers'
My Life's Review by Benjamin F. Johnson
Joel H. Johnson's diary

This history was written by Jessie Jolly Terry, a descendant of Ezekiel Johnson and Julia Hills Johnson. I have copied the information as she wrote it, only rearranged it in a place or two. I feel we the descendants of these wonderful people should cherish our heritage and try and live worthy of the blessing we enjoy through their sacrifices.

Abby Johnson K. R. Gooch